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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KWMN](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [KMPI](#) [KU](#) [WOMEN](#) [POLITICAL RIGHTS](#)  
SUBJECT: "MABROUK:" KUWAITI WOMEN GAIN POLITICAL RIGHTS YET  
PONDER THEIR PARTICIPATION

REF: A. KUWAIT 2064

- [B. KUWAIT 2041 \(NOTAL\)](#)
- [C. KUWAIT 1836 \(NOTAL\)](#)
- [D. KUWAIT 1016 \(NOTAL\)](#)
- [E. KUWAIT 944 \(NOTAL\)](#)

Classified By: DCM Matthew Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[¶11. \(U\)](#) Summary: The Government resuscitated a seemingly moribund campaign for women's political rights May 16 culminating in the passage of an amendment granting women full suffrage. On the sixth anniversary to the day that the Amir attempted to grant Kuwaiti women their voting rights in 1999, a move that failed later that year in a parliamentary vote, women won the right to cast their ballots and stand for election at the national level in a vote of 35-23 in the National Assembly. The drawn-out and chaotic legislative proceedings saw the passage of a civil servant salary increase before Parliamentarians considered various Islamist-proposed changes to the voting rights amendment. Despite gaining the right to vote, many Kuwaiti women remain apathetic, some outright hostile, toward political participation, as evidenced by an informal Embassy poll. Women's rights activists remain optimistic about the long-term implications for Kuwaiti women and the political system. End summary.

Recapping the Historic Day's Events

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[¶12. \(U\)](#) A small pro-rights rally opposite the National Assembly kicked off the May 16 events, culminating in Kuwaiti women receiving full political rights. Approximately 50 university students and activists gathered prior to the beginning of the legislative day to cheer for the passage of women's voting rights; a follow-up vote on women's municipal-level rights was scheduled on the day's parliamentary agenda (ref C). They held banners of "our political rights now" and "it's about time." Ardent rights proponent MP Mohammed Al-Sagr made a brief appearance. The group entered the Parliament and took seats in the observers' gallery before proceedings began at 9:30 am.

[¶13. \(U\)](#) Within ten minutes of the opening gavel, the Government introduced a motion to amend Article 35 of the electoral law to provide Kuwaiti women full political rights (ref B) and require the Interior and Defense Committee, which had been reviewing the amendment since its original March 7 introduction (ref E), to provide the full Assembly its report in one hour. The measure passed 37-21 altering the day's legislative docket. The motion also stipulated that women's suffrage be addressed after a vote on a salary increase for government workers (ref A). A second motion introduced by a group of MPs passed 29-28, requiring the Committee to include in its report recommendations on lowering the voting age to 18 and permitting military and security personnel to vote.

[¶14. \(U\)](#) Under pressure from MPs, the GOK agreed to include a pension increase for retirees, which will immediately cost the Government KD 30 million (\$104 million), a figure announced by Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah during the debate. The bill passed by a hand vote with 31 in favor. (Comment: Popular belief is that the approval of these increases was the GOK's necessary political concession to secure the votes of MPs who previously opposed women's suffrage. Five MPs, including one Islamist and two Shi'as, who abstained or opposed the May 2 vote for women's municipal-level rights voted May 16 in favor of full rights. The ultimate vote on full political rights of 35-23 exceeded earlier predictions of a maximum of 33 in favor. End comment.)

[¶15. \(U\)](#) At 1pm the five-member Committee submitted its report backing women's voting rights but tabling moves to lower the voting age and allow security personnel to vote. Independent MP Mussallam Al-Barrak, enraged by the report, launched into a tirade about the Committee's unfair result. His yelling continued throughout a roll call vote on a motion to proceed with the amendment to grant women's suffrage, which passed. Debate was limited to four speakers on each side of the argument, with one opponent warning that rights' supporters would burn on Judgement Day. Before the Parliament could vote on the amendment, a group of Islamists, led by MP Waleed Al-Tabtabaei, introduced three changes to the amendment.

Motions to lower men's voting age to 20 and reducing the time naturalized citizens have to wait to vote from 20 to 15 years both failed. A rider requiring women to abide by Islamic Shari'a law when engaging in political activities passed 33-24. (Note: The exact stipulations tied to the Shari'a requirement remain unclear. End note.)

Informal Poll Indicates Apathy Remains

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**¶16.** (U) With the passage of the voting rights amendment, women will now constitute 61% of eligible Kuwaiti voters while the overall electorate will more than double to 372,000, representing 39% of the citizen population. (ref D). But will the women actually vote? FSN Political Assistant surveyed Kuwaiti women over 21 in two diverse locations: upscale, seaside Marina Mall in Salmiya and popular cooperative supermarket in Shamiya, a lower-class neighborhood. In this informal May 17 poll, 58% of the 36 questioned at Marina Mall intended to cast ballots in the 2007 parliamentary elections while 31% rejected the idea. Another 11% were undecided, half of whom would vote only if paid. The results from the more popular Shamiya district indicate only 21% of the 28 participants had plans to vote while the remaining 79% said they would not go to the polls.

**¶17.** (U) Many women at Marina Mall support political participation and commented that voting "will create the balance in the community" and "will benefit us politically, economically, socially, every way." Another said, "this is what I call the balance between a man and a woman. I hate when men look at us as their assistants and not as people." On the other side, many questioned the importance of voting: "We don't care whether we have the right or not. We can do all what we want now." Another said, "What will I gain? I already have everything." At the cooperative market, most respondents opposed the idea of voting and echoed the sentiments of one Kuwaiti: "Women should be at home. Who will raise the children, the maids?" Some were far more pessimistic. "Women hate women. How can they support each other?" The most catastrophic outlook: "This is the end of the world."

**¶18.** (C) Comment: Conventional wisdom holds that the Islamists will benefit the most from women voting because women tend to be more conservative than men. The unscientific poll reveals that the majority of women from the poorer, more conservative area do not value the right to vote and remain apathetic. The women's current stance obligates the Islamists to enlist their male supporters to mobilize their wives who represent an untapped and potentially large political base. A GOK- or proposed Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)-sponsored education campaign could be key to allowing women to make their own political decisions. End comment.

Prominent Women's Reactions

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**¶19.** (C) Dr. Badria Al-Awadi, activist and lawyer, expected the Government to introduce the motion for full political rights after women's activists met with the PM who hinted that this would be the GOK course of action. She felt that dissatisfaction among international public opinion weighed on the GOK, providing a motivating factor behind the GOK's May 16 actions. At this point, she has no political aspirations of her own aside from assuming the role of spreading awareness among women. In her words, Kuwaiti women have now become full citizens. May Al-Hajjaj, a librarian at Kuwait University, also emphasized the importance of educating women, many of whom would be influenced by male relatives. Civics, she added, is not part of the school curriculum; therefore, many Kuwaitis do not understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

**¶10.** (C) Activist Shaykha Al-Nisif predicted that MPs will have to change their focus from a service-oriented focus to legislating for the good of the nation. In her opinion, MPs currently are preoccupied with serving the interests of individuals, male individuals. Now MPs will have to incorporate all citizens' concerns when campaigning and legislating. Al-Nisif responded to press reports that the Government may name a woman as Minister of Health. According to her, the PM said after the May 16 vote that there is nothing stopping the GOK from appointing women to executive positions.

**¶11.** (C) Dr. Haila Al-Mkaimi of the Kuwait University Political Science Department emphasized the long-term benefits of women's suffrage. While Islamists may benefit with new political support from women, granting women political rights legitimizes the legislative institution. To this point, she added, the National Assembly has been illegal, constitutionally-speaking, because women have been deprived of suffrage.

**¶12.** (U) Media reports quote leading activist Dr. Rola Dashti,

who was unavailable for comment today, as saying she intends to run for Parliament in 2007.

**¶13.** (U) With respect to the Islamic Shari'a rider to the women's rights amendment, Al-Nisif did not anticipate any requirements for female legislators to wear hijab. Dashti was quoted as saying that if the Shari'a restriction refers to segregation, then she has no problem with that.

Bloggers Share Their Thoughts

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**¶14.** (U) A quick scan of several local bloggers' websites reveals a congratulatory sentiment for Kuwaiti women and relief that this long-awaited political step has been taken. Mabrouk! (congrats) plastered several sites as liberal-leaning Kuwaitis posted their reactions to the May 16 vote. "We got it! I can't believe it," opened one blogger. "I know it will come back and bite us in the ass because there are a lot of misinformed and maleducated (sic) voters," the blogger continued. Another shared that "I feel angry because this should have happened a long, long time ago." In a competitive vein, one blogger wrote: "Eat that Saudi Arabia! Not only will EVERY little nation around you come to terms with the modern world, they will even indulge themselves in foreign abominations such as allowing women to ... vote for their representatives in government."

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